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Champion
RADIOHEAD
Thom Yorke gets stressed for success!

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Champion supernova: Thom Yorke shines bright

OMI! TAKE THE GLOOM

Thom Yorke stands alone backstage at Nottingham Rock City. He stares at the walls, stares at the floor and sighs. When his press officer approaches, Yorke looks up, his face a picture of discontent, then measures up the person next to his press officer – a journalist. An invader.

The press officer asks how he is and he lies, "Fine," eyes wide, shoulders tight, hands hanging limp at his sides. For two minutes he tells her about his troubles, then wanders back to the dressing room and his girlfriend, still shuffling restlessly. A mass of contradictions, he wants to be here and he wants to be far away. He wants to be with his girlfriend and yet... he doesn't.

They talk for a few moments, then Yorke's girlfriend ambles off into the crowd. Yorke walks into catering, looks blankly at the food then returns to his dressing room. He sits briefly then drifts away yet again, unable to stay still for more than a minute...

Three hours later Yorke is again backstage, this time smiling. Nottingham enjoyed tonight's show. He talks to his girlfriend animatedly and even, for a fleeting moment, affectionately. Soon, she leaves and for a minute, Yorke is sullen and mumbling miserably, before shrugging off the disappointment and talking to two female fans who have procured backstage passes. One is from Japan and urges him to drink more vodka, though Yorke declines. The other is coy and gives him an inflatable birthday cake for Johnny. "Where did you get this?" he asks incredulously. "Oh, I found it in my house," she bluffs. The singer smiles his gracious rock star smile, places the cake on the floor and says he'll leave it outside Johnny's door.

Then he's off wandering again; amiable, chatting, snatching food where he can. All the while he's smiling, content that he performed well, pleased that tonight's gig was so good.

Clearly, this is not the Thom Yorke of old. The Yorke who was prone to panic attacks, spitting, swearing and desperately bleak moods. The people around him can't believe how comfortable and confident he is in this

● Could it be that Thom Yorke, the rock star "most likely to commit suicide" and his **RADIOHEAD** cohorts are going a bit *cheery* on us?! ANDY RICHARDSON cocks a merry ear to their tales of angst-expulsion, being matey with Stipey and buddy-buddy band bonding sessions down Mexico way. Smiley pix: KEVIN CUMMINS



'Head in hands: they're cheerier, hon' (l-r) Colin, Phil, Johnny, Thom and Ed'

dressing room full of people. He's changing, they reckon. And they're right. No longer crippled by an enormous, irrational fear of failure, there are times tonight when he positively revels in the acclaim and attention, when he enjoys being in Radiohead. When he feels momentarily satisfied. He can't quite believe how he got here, how easy it all now seems. Yep, Thom Yorke is lucky, and tonight he knows it. *He really does.*

THE MOST important British band of 1995? It could well be Radiohead. It is Radiohead, after all, who have defined fashion rather than followed it, who have kept a healthy distance from the hedonistic excesses of Britpop and refused to indulge in the cocaine binges,

girlfriend, while Colin Greenwood sinks into a three-seater sofa with a large glass of Stolichnaya vodka and cranberry juice. By 1am he's the only one left, surrounded by a half-finished bottle of vodka and a row of paper cups soiled with fag butts.

Radiohead on tour is like a well-behaved public school trip. They are reliable and calm. They arrive on time and treat their crew and tour manager with respect. Their only excesses are a drop of vodka and the occasional late night.

"I'm sure we'd probably all be much happier and better party monsters if we indulged in Class A drugs," Greenwood says later, wryly, "but we'd probably self-destruct six months down the line,

about being friends or anything. We were all playing our instruments in our bedrooms and wanted to play them with someone else and it was just symbiotic. We never really thought about it.

"Years and years of tension and not saying anything to each other, and basically all the things that had just built up since we'd met each other, all came out in one day. We were spitting and fighting and crying and saying all the things that you don't want to talk about and I think if we hadn't ever done that... I think that completely changed what we did and we all went back and did the album and it all made sense."

"It was like that typical Radiohead thing, things had been brewing," Ed continues. "We're not really

Yorke's belief in the band grew:

"It was coming out rather than not coming out, you know what I mean? I think that it's something you fall back on. I'm really into this theory now that anything that's worthwhile is really difficult and if it's becoming easy it's time to f— it up."

THE ONLY thing Radiohead want to f— up now are the preconceptions of press and public. Yorke is no longer the tortured, angst-ridden subject who prompted one newspaper to describe him as the rock star most likely to commit suicide. Sure, he can still be moody, surly, difficult and solitary, but at least he now manages to balance so many potentially destructive

"We could just fall back on just doing another moribund, miserable, morbid and negative record, like lyrically, but I really don't want to, at all. And I'm deliberately just writing down all the positive things that I hear or see. But I'm not able to put them into music yet." — Thom

chic heroin habits and brash arrogance of their contemporaries.

Radiohead are an exception. In 1995, most bands sought solace in an unreal world, in a Prozac and intoxicant-addled world of rose-tinted Englishness. Lyrics were filled with fantastic falsehoods and few dared to mirror the ideas and failings of a disaffected generation... except Radiohead.

And while Yorke talked at every turn about his inner turmoil he was too smart, unlike Courtney Love, to use his pain as a bargaining chip. Rather, he described his feelings with honesty, eloquence and dignity. He found ways to enjoy his sometimes precarious lifestyle without becoming an idiot. And, like the rest of Radiohead, he made a friend of reality despite living in an unreal world.

So backstage at Nottingham Rock City is a typical scene. Guitarist Johnny Greenwood ignores a collection of presents and 24th birthday cards and leaves for the sanctity of his modest hotel room. Drummer Phil Selway collects a small kit bag and heads home to his wife in Oxford: "I clock on and clock off," he says as he breezes past. Guitarist Ed O'Brien leaves with his

which is what a lot of bands do. I'm not defending or condoning bands' use of drugs, it is a bizarre, precarious, insecure, paranoid, falsely comfortable, perspective-distorting lifestyle.

"Personally, we've never been a band to focus any energies in groupies or drugs or anything like that. I mean, I don't know any bands that do, to be honest — maybe I don't see it. We're quite a solitary band, but everyone is so different, you talk to each member of the band and you get a different answer."

The turnaround for Radiohead happened because of 'The Bends'. Twelve months ago they were stuck at RAK studios, in Charlbert Street, north-west London, fuming with each other and causing endless tantrums and panic attacks. Both Greenwoods, O'Brien, and Selway wanted a break. Yorke insisted they carry on. In November, the issue was resolved when the band went to play in Mexico.

"It all just came out," Thom Yorke remembers, "all the stuff that we'd always been fighting and I think, when we started our little band, when we were kids at school, it was never really

confrontational with one another. Things had been brewing and they basically came to a head. We were all completely knackered on this Mexican tour bus, 12 of us, with six bunks and they were about 5ft 6ins long, so you're getting no sleep. It was just ridiculous. It was something we'd been spending eight or nine years working towards and it was like, we'd never been totally honest with each other in terms of... We're not into bonding, we're friends and everything, but because of maybe our upbringing or the school that we went to we don't tell each other our problems. We deal with them ourselves. It's the only way you can deal with them."

"It's really shit to talk about that in interviews," adds Yorke, "because for most bands, it seems, there is this sort of thing about it's all ready and presented and it's like, 'Here you go' and there's an angle and there's so on and so on and it's wonderfully easy to write about... And here I am just talking about how in Mexico we all just started swearing and crying and throwing things around."

The fighting in Mexico was productive, though. Somehow, it gave Radiohead fresh resolve and, most importantly,

characteristics.

"I get people coming up on the street in Oxford," he says, "saying, 'Can I have your autograph?' Sometimes I'll say 'Yes' and sometimes I'll be really, really rude because they'll catch me when I'm not being Thom Yorke from Radiohead, like in a restaurant or something, and it'll be, 'No, piss off. But then to have people come back and say, 'We heard you're a bit difficult, a bit weird, you're not very easy to talk to'. It's the circumstance that people are talking to you in, when people come up and they want a little bit of you, their two cents' worth."

"And that, to be perfectly honest is not why I got into this, and that's just me being honest. You feel like saying to them, 'Look, this is not why I got into this and I don't really give a flying f— whether you have my autograph or not and I'd rather you didn't bother me because if I was anybody else in the street you wouldn't.'

Plainly, Yorke despises many aspects of fame, biting the hand that feeds him when it suits him. He pisses off business people to preserve his sanity and

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dismisses the press as self-serving and pointless because that protects him and his few close friends.

"I stopped reading the press when they printed I was going to top myself. And my girlfriend rings me up, really really upset, saying, 'What's all this, what have you been saying?' You know, that's when I stopped reading it. That was enough for me... But then I'm in this business, I choose to be in this business, but I also chose to be in this business on my terms, you know."

Undoubtedly, the death of Kurt Cobain – who took a not dissimilar stance – and the consequent demise of grunge has heightened Yorke's position. He is now one of the most successful of a dwindling breed of songwriters who deal only in reality. In fact, Richey Edwards was the only mainstream British lyricist in a similar position.

"That was all sort of happening as 'The Bends' came out," says Yorke. "I had people warning me a few months before Richey disappeared, before he went away the first time, warning me that he was in a bad way and his behaviour was..." his speech trails off.

Taking stock, he continues. "I thought that basically it was the British press that did it to Richey. Full stop. Although I've got lots of friends who are journalists, the few who I think were basically responsible for him having a breakdown I will always hold responsible and I will always see what we do in that light."

He pauses again, leans forward, holds his hands in front of his chest and slowly, deliberately concludes: "And I think he is still alive."

Yorke is justly proud of 'The Bends' in all its brave, mournful,

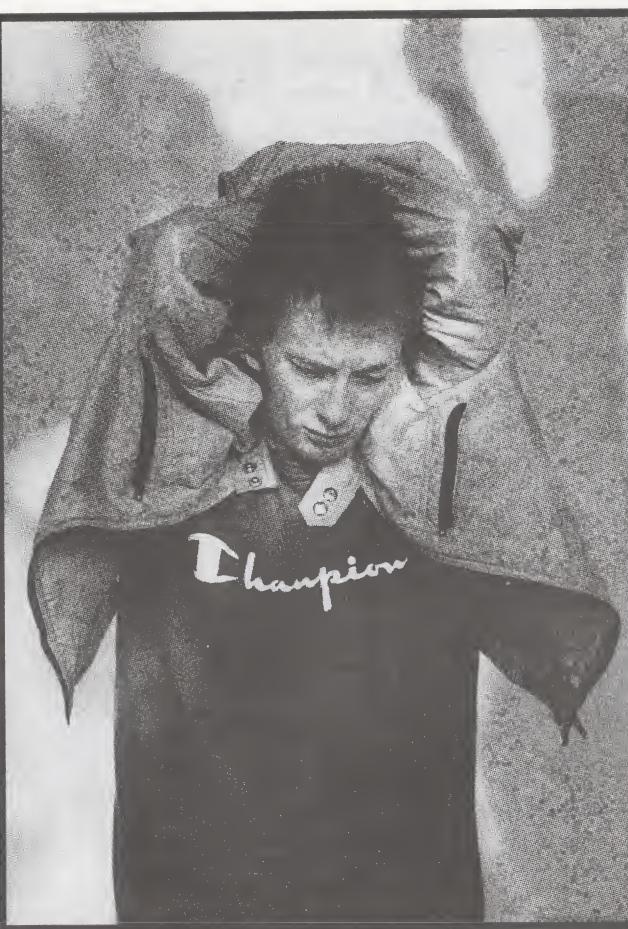
agonisingly painful glory. While Oasis sang of champagne supernovas and Supergrass spoke of feelin' alright, 'The Bends' described tortuous isolation and despair. It was bleak and vulnerable. The cover featured a photograph taken in hospital and the inside sleeve included line drawings of ostriches with their heads buried in sand. You didn't need to be a psychoanalyst to interpret the symbolism.

Now, though, Radiohead are emerging with uncharacteristic optimism. Yorke, inching towards acceptance of his rock star status, seems eager to start recording again.

"I don't know how good the new songs are," he says, modestly. "The jury's out."

He and the rest of Radiohead have already decided, however, not to make another album like 'The Bends'. They don't want to push themselves through so much torment again, and besides, they've reached a level where they don't have to. Instead, they will try to record at a more leisurely, relaxed pace: Yorke has told their label, Parlophone, that they want a year to make their next album. Apparently, the paymasters have agreed.

"You know, the big thing for me is that we could really fall back on just doing another moribund, miserable, morbid and negative record, like lyrically," he explains, "but I really don't want to, at all. And I'm deliberately just writing down all the positive things that I hear or see. But I'm not able to put them into the music yet. I don't want to force it because then all I'm doing is just addressing all the issues where people are saying that we're mope rock. As far as I'm concerned 'The Bends' is like that because that was really, really where we were at when we did it. And you could say the same



Happiness is a bit of self-constraint by strait-anorak

about REM's 'Automatic For The People'. It's a really miserable record, you know."

Instead, Radiohead will record songs like 'Lucky', the stand-out track on War Child's 'Help' compilation album. That was Johnny Greenwood's idea, to donate a song Radiohead were playing every night on tour and which the fans loved even though they did not know what it was. When Greenwood suggested it, however, Thom Yorke wasn't so sure.

"There wasn't that sense of screaming and fighting and being

when we are at home and it was just so different. It's just such a head—."

REM smashed Radiohead's preconceptions. They emerged strong and triumphant from the tour.

"A lot of it was like, yeah, we're the support band and you could go onstage and make a complete prick of yourself and the more the better, which I enjoyed doing for several months.

"It was a real full stop and it really opened things up. It took the pressure off and I could just observe, which really helped me. I got really, really drunk one night and was talking to REM about fame, and Michael Stipe was saying he went through exactly the same thing during the 'Green' tour, when suddenly they went from being a band to being a phenomenon for the first time, and he was a 'phenomenon' or whatever. And I'm not really at that stage at all yet, we're not playing Wembley yet. But I suppose it's quite funny, that idea of everything that you do, 24 hours a day, that when you go and have breakfast or go out into the street, that every single minute of every single day you're conscious of the fact that people might be watching you, is really, really unhealthy. The whole cult

Radiohead remain fiercely self-critical. Their level of self-analysis is acute, so that whenever anybody writes anything bad about them they've already thought it or said it. But then, they revel in the paradoxes and contradictions they create.

"My father asked the other day

"The whole cult of personality surrounding bands, I think, is pointless. And I think the '80s really bore that out." – Thom Yorke

on the 'phone to people for ages and spitting and swearing any more. But that was never any help to anybody, I don't think. There was a sense of release to me, that was the thing, that was the thing I wanted. To me, 'Lucky' was sort of like that. 'Lucky' is a song of complete release. It just happened, writing and recording it, there was no time, no conscious effort."

Colin Greenwood adds: "I think we're learning not to think too much about stuff. Thought can be an inhibiting thing. I don't know if you've read Arthur Miller's autobiography *Time Bends*, but analysis can be a crippling thing and self-consciousness can be a crippling thing, but it can also be a source of great creativity, and articulation of crises of thought can be a great thing in itself."

But Radiohead's change in attitude is not entirely down to the Mexican tête-à-tête. An equally important factor was their summer-long tour with REM. It acted as a stress-reliever, freeing Radiohead of the pressure of headlining each night. They went onstage, played for 30 minutes and actually – God forbid – enjoyed themselves.

The relationship between Radiohead and REM, too, was far more civilised than that between most headline/support bands – especially when the headliners just happen to be one of the biggest bands in the world. When Radiohead joined the tour Michael Stipe took Yorke to one side and told him he was a fan. They socialised after gigs, talked about shared favourite songs – like REM's 'Drive' or Radiohead's 'High And Dry' – and Stipe explained how he became a phenomenon and managed to retain his integrity.

Yorke recalls: "Everything that we've come to expect was turned completely on its head, like the idea that you get to a certain level and you lose it and that's it – you're lost – and for everything to be amicable and there be no bitchiness or pettiness about it. Onstage REM were playing with songs they've written, mucking around with the idea of being who they are and having no illusions about it – or seemingly so. And you compare that with a lot of what we feel

of personality surrounding bands, I think, is pointless. And I think the '80s really bore that out."

"Obviously people want to know about the people that make the music, but by the end of it it was just becoming so pompous. Like with the whole U2 thing at the end of the '80s, and like Madonna and so on, it all became an extension of the whole Saatchi & Saatchi concept that you can sell anything to anybody if you put it across the right way."

So when people referred to you as "the new U2", did that description annoy you for those reasons?

"That whole idea of being Thom Yorke the personality... I don't want to die having been just that. That whole thing that most pop stars are desperately trying to attain immortality through their cult of personality... this phenomenon, this Sunday review section, glossy front page... It's like 'NO!', actually. No, I don't want to be remembered for this, I want to be remembered for doing pieces of work that people liked, and other than that I don't really want to know. I'm not into this for immortality's sake. Sixty years from now, I'm going to be dead, and that will be that."

"I made the fatal error. You know I was saying I don't read any of the press? Well I read this thing because it was in the dressing room and it was saying something about, 'these people don't look like the sort of people who have looked death in the face and have walked away again', and I thought, 'Yeah, but I'm not here to prove how real I am'."

RADIOHEAD STILL manage to separate the personal and the professional, leading separate lives when the band is inactive, travelling separately to gigs during tours. Selway drives to and from his home in Oxford, the gregarious Colin travels with the crew on their tour bus and O'Brien, Yorke and Johnny drive with their tour manager in a hired Renault Espace.

Soundchecks are chaotic affairs kept in sync by a tenacious sound engineer, while before and after shows, the five Radiohead members are rarely in the same place at the same time.

"I think the more that we are doing and the more successful we

are being," says Colin Greenwood, "the harder it is to deal with on a personal level and to connect with personal wants and needs and personal life. You understand why people get caught up with quick fixes like drugs because it is quite a numbing experience. I was thinking about Blind Melon with 'No Rain', they had already toured that album at least twice before it was a success and they had to tour it again. And you can go mad. It's bizarre, it's like being in a band is a privileged, rarefied existence and you should never get complacent about it but at the same time there are pressures about it. It's interesting for me to be back here where I did my degree (Cambridge) and think about how far we've come and how far you can travel and how many places you can see, but you can still be unhappy about yourself as a person and the way you are, emotionally or intellectually."

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"My father asked the other day

how it was going," confides O'Brien, "and I said, 'Oh, you know, it could be better from our point of view'. It's similar to when someone suffers from bulimia and looks in the mirror and thinks they're too fat when they're really thin. We're getting this amazing response from people and we're thinking this isn't good enough."

In January they will take a month off. Selway will spend time with his wife, Yorke will travel around Europe trying to avoid 'The Bends', O'Brien will go to India and Colin will move to London.

Yorke says: "The only other person I've ever talked to about this is Michael Stipe and he just said, 'It takes me six months to come down from a tour at least, now, or more than that', so I can understand it actually now. All the emotions and all the tensions and the freak-outs are all stocked up and they all come seeping out at the end so you have to keep it together. It's the same with the live situation. Sometimes I think it's just amusing and it's just a joke and I just enjoy that rather than fighting it any longer."

THE NIGHT after Nottingham Rock City, Radiohead play Cambridge Corn Exchange. It is another good concert. At 11.40pm, Yorke leaves his dressing room and sits at the bottom of a stairwell.

"The secret, that I'm slowly discovering, is that if you don't feel anything inside for what you're doing it doesn't necessarily mean that it's not working. It just means that you can't possibly mean it all the time and if you do you're a sad f—."

Is there more self-confidence? Do you finally think, 'Yeah, we are good'?

"No, I hope not. But that's the same with anybody really, or should be. If you wake up every morning thinking, 'F— me I'm great', you're a boxer or something."

And are you learning, finally, to enjoy it?

"It barely pays the bills, really, but what's really scary is when you start hearing people saying things like, 'At least you don't have to work for a living', and it's, 'F— yeah'. You forget that... We are f—ing lucky."

HELP ep



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